DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 060 655 EM 009 701

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TITLE Visual Literacy--A New Concept?
INSTITUTION Green Chimneys School, Brewster, N. Y.
PUB DATE [72]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Audiovisual Aids; *Communication Skills; Concept Formation; Elementary School Students; Film Production; Photographic Equipment; *Photography; Video Tape Recordings; *Visual Literacy

ABSTRACT

It is fruitless to debate whether visual literacy is a new or old concept. It is important to train today's children in visual literacy because the mass media are more vital to them and take up more of their time than do the schools. As part of a pilot project designed to deal with the problems of reading and verbal-visual communication, a group of elementary school students were provided with cameras and films and, after some training in their use, were sent out to take pictures. The resulting pictures revealed the interests of the students. The second step was having students take photo sequences centering around a theme of their own choosing. The results showed whether the students were able to understand cause and effect and first and last. The themes chosen were used as the basis for group and individual conferences. The next step was to make movies. A natural outgrowth of the movie project was the use of closed-circuit video tape equipment. The instant playback of this equipment proved valuable in showing whether students could correct errors as they went along. (JK)

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VISUAL LITERACY—A NEW CONCEPT?

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Visual Literacy - A New Concept?

In the days of the little one-room schoolhouse, individualized instruction, flexible grouping, student tutors, self-help programs, and "home-made" instructional materials were integral parts of every teacher's daily program. But as society progressed, it became more mechanized, more specialized, more departmentalized, and, in many cases, less effective. Textbooks were improved, teacher's manuals were expanded, and a wide variety of commercial teaching aids was developed and distributed. However, along with these technological gains came an increasing awareness that education was not meeting the needs of many youngsters.

So "new" techniques were tried, new approaches were developed, and we now find ourselves trying innovations which, in reality, can be traced back to the master teacher in her one-room schoolhouse. What is apparent, however, is that the approach to educating the masses must be a multi-sensory, multi-disciplinary one, flexible and realistic in its methods and goals.

From the vast proliferation of materials that have come upon the educational scene, there has arisen anew, a re-emphasis on the value and need for a more visual approach to learning. This concept has evolved to become what is now known as "Visual Literacy". It would indeed be fruitless to debate whether this concept is new or old, innovation or repetition of what has been successful in the past. What is important is to determine its value for today's society, and to define its role in our educational system.

Ours is the age of mass media. Ours is a mobile, volatile society, and our schools, if they are to be effective, must recognize

and deal with the changes that are so rapidly taking place. For the pre-school youngster who has grown up with "Sesame Street", a visual approach to learning is already deeply ingrained by the time he enters school. How sterile must the 3 R's seem in comparison to the viable, living, alphabet he is exposed to daily. If educators are to effect change, here is the place to begin, in the early grades with the youngest learners, with those who have not yet been "turned off" by repeated failure or acceptance of mediocrity.

The controversy rages still over the pros and cons of the effect of TV on our youth. S. I. Hayakawa, leading semanticist, in a talk presented to the American Psychological Association, stressed that an important and probably most destructive element of most TV watching is that the observer has no interaction with it. Children sitting in front of their TV sets "get no experience in influencing behavior or being influenced in return. ... Is there any connection between this fact and the sudden appearance in the past few years of an enormous number of young people from educated and middle-class families who find it difficult or impossible to relate to anyone - and therefore drop out?" Hayakawa compared TV to a powerful sorcerer who snatches a child away from his parents for 3 - 4 hours a day, something like 22,000 hours by the time he reaches 18. "Is it any wonder that these children, as they grow to adolescence, often turned out to be complete strangers to their dismayed parents?"[1]

Whether one agrees wholly with Hayakawa is not at issue here. What is pertinent is that our children are daily exposed to the good as well as the "evils" of television, of the media as a whole, and

that they are being exposed to material which influences their concept-formation. How we react and respond to this challenge is the issue - how we utilize the technology and know-how of the media to make our teaching more effective - this is what is important and pertinent.

When we speak of "Visual Literacy",we refer to the numerous techniques used by people to communicate with each other in non-verbal ways. We mean body language, art forms, pantomime, graphic expression, filmed expression, picture story expression, and others too numerous to elaborate here. When we say that this is another approach to educating youngsters, we are speaking in terms of those who cannot learn visually as well as those who will not.

It is a widely -accepted truism that with unmotivated youngsters, or hostile ones, the traditional program is inadequate and ineffective. These are the children who will not, who think they cannot, learn, many of whom are in our middle-class. But it is in the slums, where nothing has made any difference, where education has truly failed, that some startling and dramatic results have been observed due primarily to the work of community-sponsored action groups. In a proposal in 1967 to establish a Youth Communications Center in the slums of the South Bronx, Professor Melvin Roman, Ph.D., pointed to this lack of change in the slums. He noted that the name of "ghetto" is a misnomer, for the community resources that made ghetto life bearable and sometimes more than bearable, which exemplified ghetto life, are completely lacking in the so-called ghettos, or slums of our big cities. He felt that efforts to create this sense of community have had little effect on the residents of the slums, and that until

the poor are equipped to find and follow their own paths of social change, none will take place. He felt that where everything else had failed, perhaps art should be tried. It was his goal to foster a sense of community in the slums by establishing a youth communications and community action center. He envisioned using film techniques to develop news and special interest stories, playing them back as a means of self-discovery and self-confrontation, incorporating drama, dance, music, painting, and design, but with the prime emphasis being placed on film because of its strong appeal for youth and its great interest for audiences. "Training in the film-making arts and group experience in neighborhood film production will appeal strongly to the adolescent's search for a meaningful cause and positive identity. Communicating successfully and contributing to meaningful social action will go far toward the establishment of autonomy and social competence. Though the experience might lead to professionalism for a few, the discovery of individual talent is secondary to the basic goals of using the communication arts for individual and social change. ... Communication - almost always a problem in adolescence - may be especially difficult for slum children without literate and articulate examples to follow." [2]

How to incorporate this concept of visual literacy into the school curriculum, how to breathe new life into the daily routine, how to eliminate some of the "crippled readers" in our schools, these are the problems we now face, and must solve. James E. Allen, Jr., U.S. Commissioner of Education, points up the enormity of our national problem. Twenty five percent of our pupils suffer from significant reading deficiencies; of these, 3 in 5 have problems so severe they

cannot be corrected in today's ordinary classroom. Eleven million crippled readers in our literate country - this is indeed a shocking statistic. It is Commissioner Allen's educational goal for the 1970's "to establish the right of all children to learn to read". He points to the "enormous strides" that have taken place within the last decade in techniques of reading instruction. "A wealth of new resources is available, from tape recorders to 'talking typewriters', to help children to teach themselves. ... No one method or set of materials works for 100 percent of the children. But for all children, except for those relatively few who require institutional care, there is some method that will bring success. Thus, how a school system goes about correcting reading deficiencies is not as important as that it begin here and now to tackle the problem."[3]

As part of a pilot project designed to approach this problem of reading, and visual-verbal communication, a group of elementary grade students in a residential independent school were provided with Instamatic cameras and film and, after a brief discussions of the mechanics of picture-taking, were sent out to take some pictures, any pictures they chose.[4] Since one of the goals of the study was to use the camera as a tool for developing a new form of self-expression, no subjects were suggested or themes given for the students. The pictures they shot were solely of their own choosing, and the results proved to be very enlightening. In many cases, a theme was apparent. For some, it was the horses; for others, the raccoon. For some students, their friends filled their pictures, and for one boy, only objects, no living things, dominated his collection. These photographs were visual statements by the children of things that were important

to them. They provided valuable insights into each child's world as he saw it and was experiencing it. The children thus were focusing on things that held special significance for them, and concomitantly revealed some very pertinent information about themselves.

Next the students were asked to use their cameras to take photo sequences; this time they were made aware that there was to be a theme and a logical sequencing. Again, much valuable information about the children was obtained. First was an indication of the child's awareness of progression of time, of logical movement from one phase to another, of causal relationships between stimulus and response. In short, his ability to take a sequence of pictures revealed his ability, or lack of ability, to understand cause and effect, first and last, and provided vital clues to his ability to focus on a subject as distinguished from background, figure-ground relationships. Equally siginificant were the themes revealed in the series. Some were of social import, others were of purely personal value, but in every case the student was revealing some very definite information about himself. The photographs were used as bases for group discussions as well as for points of departure during individual student-teacher conferences.

Having experienced a variety of techniques and effects with the still camera, the students were felt to be ready to work with the moving picture camera. By its very nature, the movie camera presented almost limitless possibilities for the students. They were encouraged to experiment and try out many techniques, and again, the results were both rewarding to the students and revealing about them. One boy, wishing to express how he feels when things begin to close in

on him, sat on a merry-go-round and had someone push him around, first slowly, then faster. The result, an exciting and expressive flash of color and movement of form, pleased him and gave him the motivation to try for other novel effects. The films were by the students and for the students. This autonomy was perhaps the most critical factor in the success of the project, for it provided for freedom of choice of subject, of equipment, of timing; in short, for complete freedom and autonomy by the student. For interested, motivated youngsters the project was a success - but for the unmotivated or hostile ones, it was a revelation and a break-through.[4]

Thus from the students' point of view, the film-making experience was both stimulating and personally rewarding. The act of producing a finished product, a movie, was in itself an accomplishment. This was direct positive reinforcement for them. They felt very special and privileged to have been selected for the project and took great pride in their creations. They learned many of the technical skills of film-making which some day may prove to be of value to them. They were introduced to an entirely new realm of self-expression, which for some may become a vocation or hobby. Above all, their feelings of personal worth and value seemed to rise as they shared their films with their peers, parents, and teachers. Many educational goals had been realized, and in an involved, exciting, innovative way, not just for the bright students, the eager ones, but even for the defeated, reluctant, "crippled" ones.

A natural outgrowth of the movie project was the use of closed-circuit video tape equipment. Some advantages of this media are readily seen. Instant play-back affords immediate reinforcement

and provides numerous opportunities for discussion. It helps develop the ability to critique, to analyze, to keep to the subject, and, in short, to detect and correct errors as they occur. The added advantage of audio accompaniment lends an intensified sense of reality to the film. The students' fluency in the use of language can be detected - his vocabulary can be analyzed and improved, his ability to express himself is observed by him. This is truly an experience in self-confrontation. Something happens, it is captured on audio and video, it is played back. It is reality encapsulated and reviewed - a moment in time is seen, and in retrospect, evaluated.

One can go on endlessly citing the activities which are inherent in this concept of visual literacy. And one can return to the days of the one-room schoolhouse with its master teacher, utilizing every modality, every discipline, every media within her grasp, and the question will still remain unresolved - "Visual Literacy - A New Concept?" But it really is irrelevant whether our concept is new, old, or a combination of both. For in the final analysis what is important is whether it can help us as educators to do the job entrusted to us - meet the academic and emotional needs of our youngsters. It is this writer's opinion that the answer must be yes.

1. New York Times, September 4, 1968

2. Community Education Proposal, Roman, Melvin, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry - Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Associate Director - Lincoln Hospital Mental Health Services - 12/15/67

3. "We Can End Juvenile Illiteracy", Reader's Digest, April 1970.

4. Progress Report - Green Chimneys School movie film project - Myra M. Ross.